## Case 2531

# Three works by Richard W. Wells and C. Ross Wellington: proposed suppression for nomenclatural purposes

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**Abstract.** It is proposed that *A Synopsis of the Class Reptilia in Australia* (1984), *A Classification of the Amphibia and Reptilia of Australia* (1985) and *A Synopsis of the Amphibia and Reptilia of New Zealand* (1985), all published in a journal controlled by the authors named above and entitled *Australian Journal of Herpetology*, should be suppressed for nomenclatural purposes in order to avoid destabilisation and confusion.

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1. It is proposed to suppress for nomenclatural purposes three papers which appeared in the '*Australian Journal of Herpetology*'. The Managing Editor of this is listed (inside front cover, **1** (3–4)) as Richard Wells and its Advertising Sales Manager as Ross Wellington. Subscriptions are payable to 'Australian Biological Services' at Wells' address. Wells and Wellington are the authors of the papers in question. The second paper is stated (p. 61) to have been 'submitted' on 30 September 1984 and been 'accepted' on 20 February 1985, giving the false impression that it had been subject to some form of independent referee or editorial consideration.

2. In the first half of this century there was relatively little research into the systematics of the Australian herpetofauna, and the composition, classification and nomenclature remained much as G. A. Boulenger of the British Museum left it in the 1880's and 1890's. In the last thirty years there has been a resurgence of work and consequently there are not only many more described species than Boulenger knew, but the binomina of the older ones have often been changed.

3. These changes, however, have generally been gradual, orderly and carefully founded, so that the classification and nomenclature (see Cogger, Cameron & Cogger, 1983) has been widely accepted. In the single area where opinions were diverse, namely the genera of elapid snakes, there was nevertheless optimism that consensus would follow.

4. This taxonomic and nomenclatural stability has been shattered by the three recent publications by Wells and Wellington in their own journal, which together constitute over 700 nomenclatural acts. In a total herpetofauna of less than 900 species, as generally interpreted, this represents destabilisation of nomenclature on a massive scale.

5. For reasons which are outlined below for each publication, the Australian Society of Herpetologists requests the Commission to use its plenary powers to suppress each of these works for nomenclatural purposes. Unless this is done names introduced by Wells & Wellington will often be senior synonyms (objective or subjective) of names proposed as a result of future proper scientific work. It is the contention of the

Society that these works of Wells & Wellington are in many respects not based on sound taxonomic research; despite this, some (but by no means all) of their names are nomenclaturally available and so present a serious threat to zoological communication.

6. *Paper 1.*
Wells, R. W. & Wellington, C. R. (1984).
A Synopsis of the Class Reptilia in Australia.
*Australian Journal of Herpetology*, **1** (3–4): 73–129.

In this paper the authors carry out 282 taxonomic and nomenclatural actions by:

(1) elevating 105 subspecies to full species,
(2) reviving 100 nominal species from synonymy,
(3) describing 13 new species,
(4) proposing 5 substitute names for species,
(5) reviving 17 nominal genera from synonymy,
(6) describing 33 new genera, and
(7) synonymising 9 currently used genera.

At first sight it might be thought that these numerous actions were based on many years of research. But there is little in the paper to support the authors' claim (p. 73) that they have examined nearly 40,000 specimens (i.e. over ten a day for a decade).

7. Of these 282 actions, only the descriptions of the 13 new species require the examination of specimens. For the remaining 269 actions the authors did not need specimens at all: the revisions (published and unpublished) of other workers, and a word-processor would suffice (several generic assignments in the first paper are, in the second, ascribed to 'computer error').

8. The 105 subspecies could be found in Cogger *et al.* (1983). They were automatically raised to full species merely by declaring 'herein formally elevated to specific status'. There is no discussion. Far from examining critical material, there is no evidence that Wells and Wellington even read the papers in which these subspecies were described; had they done so they would often have found good reasons, such as intergradation and hybridization, for not elevating them. These elevations of subspecies have no formal nomenclatural implications, but are mentioned to indicate the nature and scale of the Wells & Wellington activities.

9. Similarly the 100 nominal species restored from synonymy could be found in Cogger *et al.* (1983). They were revived merely by declaring 'herein formally resurrected from the synonymy of . . . and considered confined to [some region]', or some such formula. Again there is no discussion, and we are not told how these 'species' differ from those with which they were previously synonymized. For example, on pp. 76–77 the wide-ranging gecko *Heteronotia binoei* (Gray, 1845) is split into several species thus:

> '*H. anomalus* (Peters, 1867): herein resurrected from the synonymy of *H. binoei* for the population of north-eastern Queensland.'
>
> '*H. australis* (Steindachner, 1867) herein resurrected from the synonymy of *H. binoei* for the population in New South Wales and eastern South Australia. Note: there are several undescribed *Heteronotia* in central and south-western Australia.'

'*H. binoei* (Gray, 1845) herein regarded as confined to Houtman's Abrolhos, W.A.'

'*H. derbianus* (Gray, 1845) herein resurrected from the synonymy of *H. binoei* for the population in the Torresian subregion of the Northern Territory.'

We do not know how the populations from north-eastern Queensland etc. differ from each other, or why they should be treated as full species.

10. Proposal of the five substitute species-names did not require examination of specimens. Moreover, there is no need for any of these names. For example, on p. 76 Wells & Wellington merge without explanation the gecko genus *Rhynchoedura* Gunther, 1867 in *Diplodactylus* Gray, 1832, causing *R. ornata* to become a junior secondary homonym of *D. ornatus*; a new name is proposed for the first species but in their next work (p. 15) a year later *Rhynchoedura* is restored.

11. The 59 generic changes are not based on phylogenetic research but are largely piecemeal tamperings with the current classification. For example, on p. 75 a new genus *Christinus* is proposed for the two Australian species of the cosmopolitan gecko genus *Phyllodactylus* (which is not mentioned). Wells & Wellington fail to state how *Christinus* differs from *Phyllodactylus* or any of its synonyms. All the 'diagnoses' of the new genera (like the restored genera) suffer from this defect, which casts doubt on the validity of the new names. Incidentally, *Christinus* was divided into two genera by Wells & Wellington a year later, without any comment.

12. We believe that this paper very seriously destabilizes the nomenclature of Australian reptiles. Some taxonomists might accept a name, believing that it met the requirements of the International Code; others might reject it, considering the name invalid because of, for instance, the absence of a real diagnosis or proper description. Worse still, ecologists, physiologists and other non-taxonomists, urgently requiring a name for an undescribed taxon, might be tempted to use names that no taxonomist would accept. If this paper is not suppressed, many taxonomic and nomenclatural acts will have to be adopted or be formally refuted. After years of confusion, stability would only return after numerous rulings by the International Commission.

13. *Paper 2.*
Wells, R. W. & Wellington, C. R. (1985a).
A Classification of the Amphibia and Reptilia of Australia.
*Australian Journal of Herpetology*, Suppl. Ser. No. (1): 1–61.

In the Australian amphibia, as in reptiles, new discoveries have been gradually absorbed and there has been little disagreement among workers as to the limits of species and genera. The prevailing stability in nomenclature came to an end when Wells & Wellington took the following 65 actions:

(1) elevating 8 subspecies to full species,
(2) reviving 26 nominal species from synonymy,
(3) proposing a substitute species-name,
(4) describing 2 new species,
(5) reviving 9 generic names from synonymy, and
(6) describing 19 new genera.

14. These actions do not require the examination of specimens, let alone the carrying out of taxonomic revisions or phylogenetic research. As in the previous paper the subspecies are automatically promoted by declaring 'herein formally elevated to specific status'. Similarly the nominal species are revived simply by declaring 'herein formally resurrected from the synonomy of...' As examples of these procedures one may cite just two instances. When proposing *Pseudophryne pengilleyi* sp. nov. Wells & Wellington (p. 3) provide no description or diagnosis but say that it can be 'readily identified from its close relative *P. corroboree* by consulting the morphological and distributional data in Woodruff (1975)'. When separating *Rawlinsonia corbeni* sp. nov. from *Rawlinsonia [ = Litoria] revelata* they only state (p. 6) its distribution and the fact that its call is higher-pitched; this fact was gleaned from Ingram, Corben, and Hosmer's original description of *L. revelata*. Such blatantly nude names as these should not cause much difficulty, for they will doubtless be universally rejected. It is the names which have some semblance of legality that will cause most trouble, for they will be variously accepted or rejected.

15. Coming to the reptiles, one could hardly expect Wells & Wellington to have made many discoveries in the nine months or so following the publication of their *Synopsis*, especially in view of their preoccupation with Australian amphibians and the herpetofauna of New Zealand. Nevertheless they have taken a further 382 taxonomic and nomenclatural actions.

(1) elevating 4 subspecies to full species,
(2) reviving 91 nominal species from synonymy,
(3) describing 142 new species,
(4) designating lectotypes for 104 species,
(5) reviving 6 nominal genera from synonymy,
(6) describing 33 new genera, and
(7) proposing 2 new generic names for older names considered not available.

The same verbal formulae used in the first paper are again employed.

16. We find among the 'References' (although they are not cited) 502 papers, ostensibly published in 1983–4 by Wells, alone or in collaboration with Wellington, and find it quite inconceivable that papers could be produced at the rate of one per day. These were allegedly published in '*Australian Herpetologist*', a journal unknown to any members of the executive committee of our Society. The Australian Bibliographic Network, which lists the holdings of most of the major libraries in Australia, does not have any records of any publication named '*Australian Herpetologist*'. Separate checks with all of the mainland Australian museum libraries also failed to locate these 'publications' and their existence cannot therefore be verified.

17. Most of the 33 new genera are 'diagnosed' by briefly describing their included species. Concerning the description of *Tropiochelmys* (p. 9), an expert on chelid turtles informs us that 'there is nothing in the diagnosis that is diagnostic either alone or in combination; the diagnosis could apply to at least 60% of the known chelonians of the world.' As another example of a new genus one may mention *Panacedechis* (p. 47): the 'diagnosis' refers to the anal scales as being divided and there being 45–70 subcaudals, yet the new species *P. worrelli* has an entire anal and 27 subcaudals. Actions such as these have resulted in us coming to the conservative conclusion that there are no fewer than two generic and 74 specific *nomina nuda* contained in this paper.

18. Wells & Wellington could not have seen many of the 104 specimens which they gratuitously designated as lectotypes; for example (p. 8), the specimens of the chelid turtles *Chelodina novaeguineae* and *Elseya dentata* in the British Museum (Natural History). Staff of that Museum inform us that they have never loaned specimens to Wells & Wellington or shown them specimens in the Museum. A similar assurance was received from the Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle in Paris, which likewise houses many types of Australian reptiles named last century. Evidently Wells & Wellington obtained their information on the types in these and other museums from Cogger *et al.* (1983). Hence there is little excuse for their ignoring earlier designations of lectotypes, e.g. for the skinks *Ablepharus adelaidensis, Lygosoma graciloides* and *Tropidolopisma dumerilii.* Additional evidence that type series were not examined by the authors is the continual use for lectotype designations of terms such as 'the largest of the syntypes . . .' (e.g. *Tropidolopisma dumerilii* (p. 40) and *Dactyloperus variegatus* (p. 12)).

19. *Paper 3.*
Wells, R. W. & Wellington, C. R. (1985b).
A Synopsis of the Amphibia and Reptilia of New Zealand.
*Australian Journal of Herpetology,* Suppl. Ser. No. (1): 62–64.

The authors carry out ten taxonomic and nomenclatural actions:
(1) elevating 3 subspecies to full species,
(2) reviving 1 nominal species from synonymy,
(3) describing 2 new species, and
(4) describing 4 new genera.

20. This paper has the same format, and the same defects, as the others. One example may suffice: apparently Wells and Wellington noticed in the literature that New Zealand workers considered the frogs *Liopelma archeyi* and *L. hamiltoni* somewhat closer to each other than to *L. hochstetteri.* They thereupon propose (p. 62) a new genus for the first two species but provide no diagnosis; instead we are told to consult certain references. The same applies to the other genera. The two new 'species' are based on minor geographic variants reported in the literature: no new data are presented.

21. As shown above, the taxonomic practices displayed by Wells & Wellington in these three publications are completely inadequate as a basis for their massive destabilisation of the nomenclature of the entire Australasian herpetofauna. If their three papers in their own *Australian Journal of Herpetology* are not suppressed, the effects on Australian herpetology will be devastating and the nomenclature destabilised for decades. The merits of Wells & Wellington's proposed changes in status for old species-group and genus-group names would, eventually, be judged by the herpetological community and some changes might remain. However, leaving this to take its course will, for years, commit workers writing in refereed journals to the sterile tasks of defending well-established usage and to refuting most of Wells & Wellington taxonomic and nomenclatural actions one by one.

22. Finally, we note that the bibliography of the third paper mentions (p. 64) two 'in press' works by Wells: *A synopsis of the amphibia and reptilia of New Guinea,* and

*The Herpetology of Australia* (in 10 volumes). These will presumably cause further trouble.

23. The International Commission on Zoological Nomenclature is accordingly asked by the Australian Society of Herpetologists:

(1) to use its plenary powers to suppress, for nomenclatural purposes, the following publications:
  (a) Wells, R. W. & Wellington, C. R. (1984).
  A Synopsis of the Class Reptilia in Australia.
  *Australian Journal of Herpetology*, **1** (3–4): 73–129.
  (b) Wells, R. W. & Wellington, C. R. (1985a).
  A Classification of the Amphibia and Reptilia of Australia.
  *Australian Journal of Herpetology*, Supplement Series. No. (1): 1–61.
  (c) Wells, R. W. & Wellington, C. R. (1985b).
  A Synopsis of the Amphibia and Reptilia of New Zealand.
  *Australian Journal of Herpetology*, Supplement Series. No. (1): 62–64.
(2) to place on the Official Index of Rejected and Invalid Works in Zoology the publications suppressed in (1) above.

## Reference

**Cogger, H. G., Cameron, E. E. & Cogger, H. M.** 1983. *Zoological Catalogue of Australia*, vol. 1, Amphibia and Reptilia. vi + 313 pp. Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra.